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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4981
INFO RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 0391
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 4994
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 7213
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 1622
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC
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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

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SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: TWENTY-THREE STUDENTS ABDUCTED IN
EASTERN DISTRICT OF AMPARA

REF: COLOMBO 1887 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Twenty-three teenage students and two teachers were abducted from a private tutorial center in the Thirukovil area of the southeastern Ampara district on December 18 at approximately 10 p.m. The Government of Sri Lanka has blamed the "Tamil Tigers" (LTTE). Other interlocutors note that the abductions occurred in areas controlled by government security forces and the LTTE-breakaway Karuna faction. End Summary.

¶2. (U) The parents of 23 students believed to be abducted on the night of December 18 in Vinayakapuram, Thirukovil, in the Ampara district, registered complaints with the Thirukovil Police Department and the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC) on December 19. The students -- 16 girls and seven boys between the ages of 16 and 17 -- disappeared along with two male teachers at approximately 10 p.m. from a private tutorial school where they were taking a revision class for their O-level exams.

¶3. (C) The Ampara desk officer for the Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies, an umbrella group for Sri Lanka's NGO community, told pol FSN that the abductions were "suspected to be LTTE recruitment." Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) Military spokesman Brigadier Prasad Samarasinghe told pol FSN that the parents of the children had "gone to LTTE-controlled area to try to rescue their children" the following morning.

¶4. (C) Other observers implied that the LTTE-breakaway Karuna faction, whom United Nations observers and the Nordic-led Sri Lanka Monitoring Mission contend operates with the collusion of government security forces in the east, might have perpetrated the abductions. The monitor covering Batticaloa and Ampara for the respected Colombo-based Foundation for Co-Existence told pol FSN: "This area -- Vanayakapuram and Thirukovil -- is fully controlled by the (government) Security Task Force (STF). It is only those who work with the security forces who can carry out abductions in these areas. Security is tight and movement is closely monitored."

¶5. (C) The Ampara district desk officer for the Constitutional Council-appointed Sri Lanka Human Rights Commission noted to pol FSN that United Nations Special Advisor on Children and Armed Conflict Alan Rock (reftel) visited Vinayakapuram, Thirukovil and other areas in the

Ampara district. Rock's report concluded that government security forces were aiding the Karuna group (TMVP) in child abductions in the east. The desk officer (protect source) added: "The Karuna group operates from the Akkaraipattu STF camp in Ampara district, and regularly recruits youths from Vinayakapuram and Thirukovil. It is very possible that the Karuna group carried out the abductions of these 23 students and their teachers.

¶6. (C) The pro-LTTE Tamilnet website published the abduction story with ambiguity, quoting Tiger military spokesman Irasiah Ilanthirayan: "If any of our members are involved in outlawed activities, the punishment would be severe." In October, the LTTE released a statement declaring abduction of children for the purpose of inscription illegal, though observers deemed the statement a public relations move.
BLAKE